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ABSTRACT

This study queried 592 parents in Florida, Kansas, and New Jersey regarding their children's upcoming transition to preschool or kindergarten. Children of 222 of the parents had disabilities. Families were selected randomly from preschool programs on state lists. Parents responded to 29 items using a 4-point Likert scale and to 3 open-ended questions. Responses on the 29 scaled items were noted for all children and compared across the following dimensions: (1) preschool entry versus kindergarten entry; (2) males versus females; (3) disabled versus nondisabled; and (4) mildly impaired versus moderately impaired versus severely impaired. Results from all parents indicated generally positive views of the upcoming transition but also indicated specific concerns by a significant minority of respondents. Primary areas of concern included children's safety on the playground, issues related to riding a school bus, children's ability to communicate and obtain needed assistance, and children's ability to participate in large groups, follow directions, and do the required school work. Both family and child eagerness for the new experience were judged by parents to be greater at age 5 than age 3. Parents of children with disabilities reported significantly less child eagerness to enter the new program and significantly more parental concerns than did other parents. (MM)

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STARTING SCHOOL: PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES

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Abstract

This study queried 592 parents in three states regarding their children's upcoming transition to preschool or kindergarten. Children of 222 of the parents had disabilities.

Results from all parents indicate generally positive views of the upcoming transition but also specific concerns by a significant minority of respondents. Primary areas of concern included

* children's safety on the playground;
* issues related to riding a school bus;
* children's ability to communicate and obtain needed assistance;
* children's ability to participate in a large group, to follow directions, and to do the "work" required.

Different concerns were dominent at preschool entry than at kindergarten entry, with separation issues more significant at preschool entry and readiness issues paramount at kindergarten entry.

Both family and child eagerness for the new experience was judged by parents to be greater at age five than at age three. Parents of children with disabilities reported significantly less child eagerness to enter the new program and significantly more parental concerns than did other parents. These trends increased with the severity of the child's disability.

Data from this study present much needed empirical support for transition provisions of recent legislation and for transition policy recommendations of federal agencies and professional organizations.

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Background for the Study

Parent involvement in transition planning prior to preschool or kindergarten entry has been recommended by policy statements of the U.S. Department of Education (1991) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1992), as well as by position statements of professional organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1990), the National Association of Elementary School Principals (1990), the National Association of State Boards of Education (1988), and the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (1993). For children with disabilities, parent inclusion in transition planning was mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (P.L. 99-457, 1986; P.L.102-119, 1991) for children moving between early intervention services and special education preschool programs.

However, little research has explored parent perceptions prior to the transition event.

Methods

This study queried 592 parents in three states (Florida, Kansas, and New Jersey) regarding their children's upcoming transition to preschool or kindergarten. Families were selected randomly from preschool programs on state lists. Programs were located in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Response forms were given to parents by their children's teachers and mailed by parents to the investigators in envelopes provided. Parents responded to 29 items using a 4-point Likert scale and to three open-ended questions.

Children of 222 of the parents (37%) had disabilities, ranging from mild to severe and including all of the types described in Federal special education legislation. Parent descriptors of their children's disabilities were used in the analysis.

Responses on the 29 scaled items were noted for all children and then compared across the following dimensions: preschool entry vs. kindergarten entry, males vs. females, disabled vs. nondisabled, and mildly impaired vs. moderately impaired vs. severely impaired. Responses to the open-ended questions amplified the quantitative data.

Results

Most parents reported that both they and their children were eager for the new school experience, that their children were ready for new challenges, and that the new school would be likely to meet their child's needs (see Table 1).

However, a signifcant minority had some concerns, chiefly about their child's safety on the playground, riding the school bus, getting needed assistance, and/or ability to participate in a large group, to follow directions, and to do the "work"

required (see Table 1). In open ended responses, many parents of entering preschoolers noted concerns about parent- child separation. At both ages, many parents commented that they hoped that their child would develop friendships and "like school."

Different concerns were emphasized at preschool entry than at kindergarten entry (see Table 2). Parent and child eagerness for the new experience was judged by parents to be greater at age five than at age three.

Few significant gender differences were reflected in parent perceptions: Girls were reported to be more eager for school entry than boys. While mothers of girls said they worried more about their daughters than did mothers of boys about their sons, mothers of boys did have significantly greater concern about their children's ability to do the schoolwork required than did mothers of girls.

Parents of children with disabilities reported significantly less eagerness by children and adults to enter the new program and significantly greater concerns both about the appropriateness of the new program and about their children's ability to perform well in it (see Table 1). These reactions were similar for both preschool entry and kindergarten entry, and they increased with the severity of the child's disability. At the same time that parents of children with disabilities expressed heightened concerns about their child's school entry, the majority of them also shared with other parents the opinion that their child is ready for new challenges, for more exposure to academic subjects, and for the opportunity to meet new playmates. Parents of children with disabilities requested more information about the transition process than did parents of children without disabilities, though, overall, the majority of parents indicated they would like to learn more about the new school's program, staff, and services.

Discussion

Data from this study underscore the "family milestone" nature of a child's preschool entry and kindergarten entry. They also present much needed empirical support to the policy recommendations cited above. Positive family attitudes about both the child and the new school appear to be present to support most young children at the time they enter a new school.

Many of the areas of concern cited both by parents of typically developing children and by parents of children with disabilities can be addressed by community transition planning and information sharing. It is likely that many of those concerns can be reduced or eliminated by improved communication between school and home (Love et al., 1992; Rosenkoetter, Hains, & Fowler, in press); examples include family visits to new schools, conferences with teachers and therapists, and information sharing about children's learning and behavioral characteristics with new school staff, family members, and previous teachers and therapists. Parent concerns about readiness issues may diminish as more preschools and kindergartens prepare to teach all the children who come to them- -including those with diverse special needs,

developmental delay, and disability--rather than expecting children to adapt to an entrance criterion upon arrival at the new school (Love et al, 1992; NASBE, 1992; USDOE, 1991).

Though more research questions remain, these data show that parents view early childhood transitions differently. The same parent may both anticipate an upcoming transition and have concerns about it. The results of this study suggest that parent participation in the transition process, both to give and to receive information, may be a valuable aid to a child's adjustment to a new setting.

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TABLE 1

Percentage of Parents of Children without Disabilities, with Disabilities, and with Moderate/Severe Disabilities Responding "Quite a Bit" or "Very Much"

	Children without Disability	Children with Disability	Children with Moderate/ Severe Disability
1. My child is eager to go to preschool (PS) or kindergarten (K)	89	70	61
2. I am eager for my child to go to PS/K	93	80	72
3. My child worries about going to PS/K	10	4	7
4. I worry about how my child will do in PS/K	20	41	49
I look forward to my child starting PS/K because			
1. He/she is ready for new challenges	83	70	67
2. The services may be more appropriate there	59	51	50
3. There will be more children without disabilities there	not asked	28	27
4. I will have more time to pursue family & personal activities myself	35	32	35
5. My child is ready for different playmates	57	51	47
6. It will be good to have different teachers & therapists	53	36	35
7. It will be good for my other children for this one to start PS/K	41	36	33

Table 1 continued.

	Children without Disability	Children with Disability	Children with Moderate/ Severe Disability
8. There is more opportunity for family involvement in PS/K	43	30	22
9. I like the PS/K's philosophy better than where we are at present	36	19	14
10. I am eager for my child to do more with academic subjects	75	59	57
I have these concerns about my child starting PS/K			
1. Being safe on the playground	28	31	39
2. Riding the bus	27	36	43
3. Being in a larger group	29	31	33
4. Managing eating	24	27	30
5. Managing toileting	13	31	46
6. Asking for help/being understood	28	49	60
7. Doing the "work"	21	39	51
8. Meeting new staff	13	23	32
9. Being afraid in the new school	14	28	40
10. Following directions/ working & playing independently	23	36	44
11. Getting needed services	17	35	52
12. Managing medical needs	15	17	30
13. Meeting unfamiliar children	13	20	22
14. The larger number of children	14	24	28
15. Different communication between school & home	14	28	37

TABLE 2

Differences between Parent Perceptions
at Preschool (PS) and Kindergarten (K) Transitions
(Percentage of Parents Responding "Quite a Bit" or "Very Much")

	Children without Disability		Children with Disability	
	PS	K	PS	K
1. My child is eager to go to preschool (PS) or kindergarten (K)	76	90	60	78
2. I am eager for my child to go to PS/K	86	94	80	80
3. My child worries about going to PS/K	0	12	4	5
4. I worry about how my child will do in PS/K	6	23	39	43
I look forward to my child starting PS/K because				
1. He/she is ready for new challenges	89	83	71	69
2. The services may be more appropriate there	71	58	62	41
3. There will be more children without disabilities there	not asked		26	32
4. I will have more time to pursue family & personal activities myself	24	36	39	26
5. My child is ready for different playmates	57	58	57	46
6. It will be good to have different teachers & therapists	45	54	41	33
7. It will be good for my other children for this one to start PS/K	30	42	30	27

Table 2 continued.

	Children without Disability		Children with Disability	
	Age 3	Age 5	Age 3	Age 5
8. There is more opportunity for family involvement in PS/K	44	43	30	30
9. I like the PS/K's philosophy better than where we are at present	50	33	19	18
10. I am eager for my child to do more with academic subjects	59	77	58	59
I have these concerns about my child starting PS/K				
1. Being safe on the playground	20	30	34	28
2. Riding the bus	22	27	47	21
3. Being in a larger group	27	50	31	
4. Managing eating	6	15	20	15
5. Managing toileting	17	11	41	21
6. Asking for help/being understood	15	30	48	51
7. Doing the "work"	15	21	29	49
8. Meeting new staff	10	14	24	23
9. Being afraid in the new school	16	15	32	24
10. Following directions/ working & playing independently	24	34	30	42
11. Getting needed services	9	19	31	41
12. Managing medical needs	13	16	17	19
13. Meeting unfamiliar children	9	14	13	25
14. The larger number of children	12	15	17	29
15. Different communication between school & home	14	14	23	22